

# Understanding Grief in the Workplace

Presented by: John Nesseth

Created by: Dave Nesseth

# Introduction

- We spend a good portion of our lives “working” diligently to acquire the things that really make it for us – meaningful things like:
- our families
- friends
- a husband or wife
- children
- a home
- a job
- a good car to drive
- money (let's face it)
- security

# Example

- Look around your workplace/or office as I suspect pictures, gadgets or mementos surround you.
- They all represent something very fond to you or bring positive happy memories.

# Examples of Changes

- What is happening in the work place today?
- What is the workplace telling you?
- Uncertainty about your future in this job  
maybe at risk.
- You are asked to do more with the same  
amount of pay or salary.

# Loss of Control

- Quite naturally when we start to loose control, we start to grieve.
- The demands of the workplace is forcing us to look at reality.
- Our professional life is being challenged
- "we are loosing it"
- Where is your job in five years or five months?

# What do you feel?

- Anxious
- Fearful
- Depressed
- Despondent
- Frustrated
- If you were not having some of these feelings you maybe numb.

# Your Investment

- 40 hours a week or maybe more
- Second home or family
- Social life
- Years of service

# Disappointment

- What happens to the open position that you thought you deserve and were qualified for?
- Or what happens when the boss you liked to work for is transferred and the new boss is a jerk or overbearing?
- Or the supervisor you have entrusted as your right hand tells you they are leaving the agency?

# Minor Grief Situations

- Did you think this was the end of the world?
- Did you think you would be able to work again?
- Could you figure out what would work for you going forward or did you get stuck in avoiding your feelings?

# Major Grief Situations

- What are some major reactions of grief at the workplace?
- The death of a co-worker who was depressed and committed suicide.
- The domestic/troubled marriage you have and want a shoulder to cry on but are feeling you do not want to burden others or have others feel sorry for you.
- You have been told your program is going to fold into another program and there will only be three persons going forward.
- You are going to be laid off.

# Client Grief Situations

- What happens to the client you have been working with for the last 15 years as part of the Community Support Services Unit, dies of a major heart attack?
- A chronic mentally ill client you visit on Monday dies on Tuesday of suicide .
- What are your feelings?
- Guilt – what did I miss? I should have seen his depression. Why didn't he tell me he was depressed?

# Feelings

- **Emotional Release** – what is the initial or gut feeling you have when you see the work place changing?
- A workmate tells you they have cancer or a very troubled marriage.
- Do you want to cry or leave the building or take some time for yourself?
- Are you frustrated and ask yourself why do I work here? Can you say I hate my workplace?
- Are you feeling fear or anxiety? Are you able to talk to someone?
- Let's explore more stages of grief

# Shock or Denial

- Using such words as “I can not believe this, or tell me this is not true.
- Shock or denial for humans is a way of “anesthesia” that numbs us for a while until we get our inner resources together in order to cope with the bitter reality.

# Emotional Release

- After the initial shock and denial there is some kind of emotional release such as crying, rocking or even wanting to run away.
- If tears are present this is a normal outlet and needs to be encouraged.
- Caution: Do not tell anyone “don’t cry you have to be strong”. These types of comments indicate you are weak and tears are not acceptable.

# Depression

- Depression is a natural and normal emotion of loss or grief.
- Feelings of sadness, loneliness or discouragement, hopelessness or helplessness are to be expected.

# Guilt

- Guilt is another normal stage of loss.
- You could be asking yourself
  - “ If I would have only known that”
  - “ If I only would have taken a second look”
- This usually takes the role of “Monday morning quarterbacking” and causes an enormous amount of unnecessary worry.

# Anger or Rage

- As we mentioned earlier that anger or rage can be a normal outlet of emotion and is usually pointed at a specific person or object.
- Unexpressed anger or frustration can lead to depression and needs to come out in a healthy way and we need to channel this activity.
- Anger can be displaced and usually is "expressing the intense hurt or frustration" to an individual or group because they have no one to turn to.
- If anger is turned against us it usually is not truly directed to us and we should not take it personally.

# Fear or Anxiety:

- A typical response to any loss is “now what do I do?”
- How can I go on without my job or the changes we experience from the system?
- “I have never experienced this type of feeling before”.
- Usually a person can feel powerless and confused.

# Telling your story

- Allow your self or others to tell the story of what happened with no judgment or comment.
- A person may need to repeat the story as a form of releasing or venting their feelings and mastery over the situation.

# Discovering new patterns to move on

- Often when we experience grief we may have established patterns that were destructive thus causing more hurt or loss.
- An example could be losing a baseball game and you throw the bat or lose a note and find yourself getting quite angry with yourself or blame someone.
- Was this approach healthy to me or to others? Could I find a more healthy approach to loss? How do I cope with cancer?

# Search for meaning

- This process of loss usually occurs when you have time for reflection. You could discover you have lost your faith in people or god or in human life.
- Example: What can I make out of losing my job or my wife? What did I do to her for her to want to leave me?

# Reaffirmation of your life

- Some researchers have indicated the final stage of loss or grief is acceptance.
- Loss is apart of your life.
- Changes are going to take time to process and heal.
- The scar will never go away type of example.

# Maladaptive Grief

- This experience is when the natural or normal stages of grief do not occur.
- A person could get stuck anywhere in the process and not move on.
- This could be called abnormal grief because they were not able respond to the loss. This often happens with individuals who were not able to cry or had to intellectually respond to the grief.
- An example of the 51 year mother who lost her son and indicated to the counselor that he died last year and in reality he had died 10 years earlier.

# Emotional Attachment

- How long do we allow ourselves to grieve?
- Some experts say that a serious grief incident may take up to a year or more and others indicate the loss is attached to the degree of emotional attachment to situation or person.
- Others indicate the significance of those around who can assist make the difference in grieving the loss.
- So a stronger support system is significant.

# What forms of help do I need?

- Books
- Support group
- Supervisor to talk with
- Listening ear

# Changing work environment issues

- Develop a formal or informal response team of individuals who are interested in getting together for the goal of voicing or sharing feelings.
- I would recommend you have a facilitator experienced in dealing with group process and maybe some one from outside of your unit. I would encourage the supervisor or unit division leader be involved too.

# Co-workers Experiencing Grief

- Take time to share what is happening to you with co-workers (if you so desire) and provide a brief overview of what it is that is happening. Keep the information brief.
- Co-workers can provide:
  - listening ear
  - support
  - empathy

# Death of Client or Co-Worker

- Memorial service or reflection time
- The funeral home is usually for family and friends and a memorial or reflection service at the worksite is more important for staff.

# Questions

- Are there other workplace grief situations or examples that I missed that you have questions about?
- Are there other avenues of support you would offer or other questions?